

Guide to dealing with the corporate media



A guide to using the mainstream corporate or state media to get your message across.

Guide to dealing with the press



An article with advice on all aspects of dealing with the mainstream press, including face-to-face, press releases, interviews, making complaints and more.

Contains some UK-specific details.

Part 1: What we're up against

A. Triviality

Every media outlet shares the same principal aim: to expand its share of the market. It does this by seeking to grab and hold onto people's attention. This is why the media concentrates so much on events rather than issues, and especially trivial, flashy and colourful events. Most journalists are convinced that people can't concentrate for more than a few seconds. This is mainly because they can't concentrate for more than a few seconds.

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B. Bias

Many outlets have a secondary aim: of pandering to the prejudices of their proprietors. As most large news-gathering organisations are run by perverse billionaires whose interests are at odds with those of the rest of society, this makes life still harder for us.

In practice, it means that there are some outlets we simply have to avoid: there's no point in approaching the Sun, for example, unless you're appealing to narrow nationalism or are prepared to get your tits out. Stay well away from the Daily Mail, unless you're highlighting an animal rights issue which doesn't involve a confrontation with big business/landowners/hunters etc.

But there are often a surprising number of opportunities for making use of other parts of the right-wing media: some of the things that occasionally slip past the editors' noses at the Telegraph and Sunday Telegraph, for example, are pretty unexpected. While their editors and proprietors may be total bastards, a lot of journalists are not bad people, just weak and cowardly. Many of them want to help, and will look for opportunities to do so without upsetting their bosses.

Newspapers are allowed to be partisan, and expected to be by their readers. But the broadcast media are legally obliged to be balanced and fair. In practice, as we know, this isn't always the case, and there are certain programmes, such as Littlejohn, which you should avoid at all costs. More importantly, their concept of fairness is a narrow one: as long as both Labour and Tory politicians have had their say, balance is seen to have been achieved, even if the view from Westminster represents just a tiny part of the political spectrum.

Most broadcast outlets are also very conscious of the views of their advertisers, and even more trashy than the printed ones. The result is, once again, conservatism: broadcast journalists appear to be terrified of telling their audience something it doesn't know already.

C. The Game

Another way in which we're up against it is that we take our campaigns seriously, while interviewers tend to see their work as a game, whose political outcome is immaterial, but which must be played by a set of rules. These rules are, at first sight, obscure to people without a lot of media experience. If you don't play by the rules, it's a foul and you're sent off.

As our only objective is to win, regardless of etiquette, we tend to foul more often than other contributors. As a result, sometimes we come across very badly.

That's the bad news, but there's also plenty of good news: we have several significant advantages over our opponents.

Part 2: Our advantages

A. Integrity

We're genuine people, not hired hands defending a corporate or institutional position. This shows when we allow it to: an open and straightforward appeal to commonsense can cut through the clamour of self-interest and spin-doctoring with a powerful resonance. When we keep our message uncluttered and get straight to the point, we can be devastatingly effective.

B. Articulating Public Sentiment

People are increasingly prepared to listen to what we have to say: many know in their heart of hearts that things are going badly wrong, and could be very much better. Activists in the media have often been able to reach parts of the public psyche that no one else can touch, as they articulate sentiments that have never been put into words before. Hard as it may be to believe, a lot of mainstream journalists are secretly sympathetic to the causes we espouse.

C. Inherent media friendliness We're colourful, fun, outlandish and outrageous. Much as television executives might claim to hate us, television cameras love us.

Part 3: How to get the press to come to your action News doesn't just happen; it is made to happen. News, in other words, is managed and manipulated. And if we don't manage it, someone else will.

A. Coordination

Media work tends to be tacked onto actions as an afterthought, with the result that there's almost always too little of it and too late. Invariably, far too much is left to chance, which means that actions often end up alienating more people than they reach or, even worse, get completely ignored. If we built our tree houses with as little forethought and care as we conduct our press work, there would have been some pretty gruesome accidents by now.

Reaching the media is as time-consuming, as demanding and as necessary as building lock-ons or digging tunnels. If we don't start tackling this task with the efficiency and creativity that we bring to the rest of our work, we'll be worsted

again and again by our opponents.

This means that every action aimed at altering public opinion must have a dedicated media coordinator, whose job is to ensure that the activists' point of view reaches the wider world.

She or he must be responsible for planning a press strategy, drawing up a hit-list of journalists, preparing press releases and briefing spokespeople. Ideally the coordinator will build up a small team, including someone who stays behind to write and despatch up-to-the-minute press releases and people who will meet and escort the journalists who come to an action.

Not everyone is going to be good at handling the press. To do the job well, you need to be confident, sociable and pretty mouthy. At least one person on the team should be able to write well. But media skills, like any others, can be learnt, and surprisingly quickly.

B. Timing

Is critical. You have to give journalists enough notice of your action or initiative, but not so much that they forget about it. A good time to put out a first, advance press release, for example, is about ten days beforehand, with a second one sent out two days beforehand.

Journalists don't only have a three-second attention span, they also have a three-second memory, so you've got to keep on their case.

The day of the week is also important. A great day for an action, from the point of view of publicity, is Sunday, as not a lot happens on Sundays, and journalists need something to put in Monday's papers and in Sunday afternoon's news programmes. If you can do it before lunch, so much the better. The later in the day something happens, the less likely the newspapers are to cover it, as they can't get it to press on time.

If you really want your action to be ignored by the press, then do it on Budget Day. In other words, look out for what else is happening that day. If there's a huge story pending, you don't want to be competing with it. Nor do you want to be competing with another alternative event: they won't cover two protests on the same day.

C. Pre-publicity

Most journalists are also astoundingly unimaginative and cowardly: they don't want to touch an issue unless it's already been mentioned in the press. If you can pull it off (and it's not always possible), it's very useful to get a friendly and trustworthy journalist to flag the action up a week or two beforehand, without giving too much away.

The best way to achieve this is:

- 1) Find your journalist
- 2) Invite her/him to your meetings, under what are called "Chatham House" rules. This means that they can't make use of anything they hear there without your permission.
- 3) Create an atmosphere of secrecy, excitement and intrigue, which only that journalist (or, as a maximum, two or three journalists) is privy to. All journalists love to imagine they're in the Famous Five.
- 4) Be very nice to them and make them think they're part of the gang.
- 5) Once it's been mentioned in the press, you'll find that there's a lot more interest from other reporters. Pathetic really, but there you have it.

D. Press releases

Journalists speak only one language, and that's their own. If you're going to reach them you have to speak that language too. This means that your press release should mimic the format and style of a news story. It's a simple and straightforward formula and (sorry to be dictatorial) it **MUST** be applied. If it isn't, your press release won't work. Period.

Here's how to do it:

(from top of page)

i. Your contact details

ii. Embargo

iii. HEADLINE (NO MORE THAN EIGHT WORDS)

iv. First paragraph: one sentence which tells the whole story.

v. Two or three short paragraphs explaining the story.

vi. Contact details (again)

(bottom of page)

(new page)

vii. Notes for journalists

Here's how to fill it in, section by section:

i. Your contact details. No journalist will run a story without them.

Essentials are:

The name of your organisation/disorganisation (preferably big, bold and across the top of the page)

One or more contact names

Contact number(s): where contacts are DEFINITELY going to be for at least the next two days (mobile phone numbers are useful).

ii. An embargo means that you are instructing journalists not to publish or broadcast the information in the press release before a certain time. There are several good reasons for an embargo:

Journalists will know they aren't going to be trumped by anyone else getting in before them.

It creates a sense of event.

Timelines concentrate journalists' minds.

You know when to expect publicity, so you can plan subsequent news management around it.

NB: An embargo doesn't mean that journalists won't be stupid enough to phone the police or the company due to be occupied and ask what they think. So don't stick anything on your press release which you don't want to be generally known.

This is the usual format:

EMBARGO: 00.01am, Friday 15th May

00.01am is a good time, as the papers can then keep up with the broadcasters, and it's less confusing than 00.00.

DON'T put on an embargo if you've got some immediate news, that you want on the radio or TV straight away. Generally, you'd embargo a press release giving advance warning of an action (till about 24 hours before the action's due to start), but not a press release which comes out once the action's started.

iii. The headline must be short, pithy and to the point. Avoid mystery, elaborate puns or being too clever. The purpose of the headline is to grab the journalists' attention and give them an idea of what the press release is about. If it doesn't do both of these things, they'll read no further and dump it in the bin. It must be NO MORE than eight words long. Use a big, bold font.

Writing headlines isn't easy, and generally takes a good deal of practice. So practise. Look at how they do it in the papers, then try writing headlines for imaginary actions, or real ones which aren't going to happen for a while. Remember: in this as in all writing, a straightforward, plain style is best.

iv. The first paragraph. This isn't easy either but, like the headline, it's essential to get it right.

You've got ONE sentence in which to tell the whole story. If the journalist doesn't get the jist of it, she or he won't read on.

There is nothing so complicated that its essential point can't be summarised in a simple sentence. So work out what you're trying to say, then boil it down to its essence. As before, look at the news stories in the papers and see how they do it.

v. The rest of the text. Must be no more than two or three paragraphs long, each of which should be no longer than one or two straightforward sentences. They should expand on what you say in the first paragraph. Keep it simple and avoid jargon. Assume (and you won't be far wrong) that journalists know nothing. If there is other essential information which you can't fit in, put it in the Notes for Journalists section. (see below).

Above all, make sure that the first and second paragraphs have covered all the five Ws: WHO, WHY, WHAT, WHERE and WHEN.

vi. Your contact details again. Remember: most journalists have a three second memory, are wilfully blind and very, very stupid, so you have to keep on their case.

vii. Notes to journalists. This is optional. Preferably they should be on a separate page.

Journalists have got very little time, and the sight of a huge block of text which is hard to digest will put them off. They want to look at the first page and know that the essentials of the story are there. If they want more, they can turn over and read on.

Generally, you'd write no more than four or five paragraphs of notes (and certainly no more than a page). They should give more details about the rationale for the action: eg facts and figures about genetically engineered soya, DBFO roads etc. In other words, this is the place for the complex information which might put journalists off if it's on the front page.

Number the paragraphs in this section, as it makes it them look easier to digest.

E. What makes a press release effective

News, of course, is meant to be all about novelty, so emphasise what's new about your action.

This shouldn't be difficult as the DIY movement is so creative and innovative:

people are

always coming up with exciting new approaches, so all you have to do is make sure the press hears about them.

Take the Birmingham Northern Relief Road protest, for example. A headline like "Protesters occupy trees along route of new road" will consign a press release straight to the bin, as most journalists will imagine they've heard it all before. But "World's longest sermon threatens to stop new road" (telling the story of the vicar who has discovered that it's illegal to interrupt a priest during his sermon, and intends to preach continually in front of the threatened trees) will make them sit up and wonder what it's all about. If you want to mention the tree-sit, you can do so further on in the text.

There might also be a new political aspect of the story you can use to attract the journalists'

attention to your protest: "New road could destroy region's economy, experts say" would, for most journalists, be counter-intuitive and interesting (which shows how much they've been paying attention).

If your action's outside London, and you're organizing transport to get there, say so in the press release, pointing out that journalists are welcome to join you on the coach. Many reporters are so lazy that they won't bother turning up unless everything's laid on for them.

F. When to send press releases

The most critical press release is the one that goes out about two days before the event.

Without it, you won't get much coverage, if any at all. But it's a good idea to put one out much earlier than that as well - about ten days prior to the event - so that when the journalists get the second one they should be ready to respond to it.

It's also important to send out a third one the moment the action begins, telling them you've succeeded in stopping work on the bypass/locking Group 4 in their offices etc.

If it's a one day action and your press person has still got the energy and

resources, it's no bad thing to send out a fourth press release saying how it all went. A journalist's interest is pretty unpredictable, and could be stimulated at any time.

If the action lasts longer than one day, send out a new press release every day, as long as you've got something to say. Once the event's in the press already, there'll be plenty of opportunities for follow-ups. This is the time when you can sometimes get them to cover the issue you're trying to highlight, rather than simply the event.

G. Who to send them to

The secret of all successful press releasing is getting them to the right people - so find out who the right people are. Make a list of:

Media outlets you want to reach

Individual journalists who seem to be interested in/sympathetic to the cause The more you can reach the better, of course, but, unless you're just aiming at the local press, realistically you want to try to press release at least forty places.

If it's a national action and you want national publicity, they must include the following: All the broadsheet newspapers

BBC newsroom

ITN/Channel 4 newsroom

Newsnight

The Today programme (on Radio 4), plus PM, The World at One, The World Tonight Radio 5 Live

NB: You should adapt the tone and contents of your press release to the media you're trying to reach. "Road protesters come to Romford" might be of interest to the Newham Recorder, but to get to the nationals you'd need something more like "New front opens in road war".

H. How to send press releases

Faxing is still the best way to send them, and a fax modem is invaluable. Some journalists are beginning to emerge from the Neolithic, so they might be contactable by email, but on the whole the communications industry is the last place to use up-to-date communications (except the Department of Trade and Industry, which runs the government's Technology Foresight programme, yet can't use email). Don't use snail mail: it invariably gets lost/disregarded/placed on the bottom of the pile.

To get fax numbers, simply phone the papers, TV and radio stations in question and ask for the fax number of the Newsdesk. If you also want to send your press releases to named journalists at the same organisation, it's best to get their fax numbers off them: reception will often give you the wrong fax number, or one that's been out of date for months. Keep all the fax numbers you get for future reference. Best of all, load them permanently into your computer, so, once you've decided who should get what, your fax modem can contact them automatically.

I. Following up

One thing of which you can be absolutely certain is that something will get lost in the newsrooms you're targetting: either your press release, the journalist's concentration or the essence of the story. This means you **MUST** follow it up with a phone call.

Just a quick one will do. Ask:

Did you get it?

Will you be covering the action?

Do you need any more information?

They're likely to be rude, gruff and unhelpful. But don't be put off - they're paid to be like that. Make sure you're ready, if need be, to summarise the story in one or two sentences; the first question the journalist will ask is "wot's it all about then?", and her/his attention will wander if you spend more than ten seconds telling them.

However rude they are, never fail to be polite and charming: at the very least, you'll put them to shame.

Part 4: How to deal with journalists who come to your action The whole media-exploitation process is about news management, and this is just as much the case once journalists get to the action as it is when you're trying to attract them. You've got to give the best possible account of what you're doing, and provide the clearest possible explanation of why you're doing it. This means:

A. Make sure the right people talk to the journalists.

Different people do different things best. Some are brilliant at designing leaflets or debating, but not much good at being charming to the "running dogs of the counter-revolution" and some people will have just dropped a tab of acid. This won't endear them to journalists.

Talking to the press is something of an art form: you must be charming, persuasive and well-briefed. Best of all, you'll have practised, by persuading your friends to pretend to be hostile reporters.

B. Be careful, but don't come across as suspicious.

Some of them will be there to help you, others will be there to get you. Sometimes the ones out to get you will pretend to be out to help you. The only real safeguards are:

to know who they all are. Ask them who they are and who they work for. Some journalists are notorious for dissing the movement (eg John Harlow, James Bartholemew, Sebastian Sebag Montefiore). You should find out who the dodgy ones are before the action, so you'll know to be ultra-careful if they turn up.

not to say anything stupid or risky

be friendly towards them, whoever they are. Bite your lip. Don't put their backs up even if you hate the bastards.

C. Be a tour guide

Take them round the site, show them what you want them to see, and steer them away from what you don't want them to see. Introduce them to the people who'll get on well with them, and keep them away from the people who won't be able to restrain their contempt. If it doesn't seem like a major intrusion on their privacy, stay with them, in a friendly way, and talk them through everything they

see.

D. Be ready to deal with the ones who don't turn up However good your publicity, lots of journalists won't be able to make it, but might still be interested. They'll want to know what's happening and how things are going, so there should be at least one person on site with a working and charged-up mobile phone whose number has been posted on the press release. Journalists are suckers for on-the-spot reports, so when they ring, put some excitement into your voice. Give them plenty of colour, make them feel they can see it.

Part 5: Being interviewed

Interviews and studio discussions are a bloodsport, and you, the interviewee, are the one of the combatants. People watch or listen to them in the earnest hope that one or other of the participants will be gored to death. Like any other fight, you win not through brute force but through skill. And, like any other sport, there are rules you have to follow.

So here are the rules and tactics. Try them out on your friends. Practice, as in any other sport, is absolutely critical. If you haven't done many interviews before, get someone to pretend to be the interviewer a day or two before you're due to go on, and get her or him to give you a hard time. See how you do, and find out which parts of your technique you'll have to brush up.

If you don't practise, expect to be caught out every time. If you do practise, you'll find that all you have to do is repeat what you've been through already, which isn't a scary prospect at all.

Rules and tactics

Be informed. This is the golden rule. Remember, this is an information war, and the best warriors are the ones with the best information. Don't go into a studio unless you're confident that you know your subject better than the person you're up against, and can head her or him off if they try to outfox you with some new facts. This means lots of reading. Make sure your information is reliable and stands up to critical examination.

Be calm. However much the issue, or your opponent, winds you up, you mustn't let it show.

Generally the calmest person is the one whom the audience sees as the winner. This doesn't mean you can't be passionate and enthusiastic - indeed these are good things - but your passion and enthusiasm must be tightly controlled and mustn't, repeat mustn't, spill over into anger. If necessary, take a deep breath before answering the question. Be polite but firm with everyone.

Be concise. It's amazing how little time you get. You must know exactly what

you want to say, and say it in as few words as possible, with clarity and determination. The main point

must come at the beginning of the interview: you should summarise the whole issue in just one or two sentences before expanding on your theme.

It's the answers that count, not the questions. When you go into the studio, you must know exactly what you want to say and how you want to say it. Don't be too scrupulous about answering the question: deal with it as briefly as possible, then get to the points you want to make. You must leave the studio at the end of the interview knowing you've made the most important points as effectively as possible.

Don't try to make too many points. You want to have a maximum of three main lines of argument. Any more and both you and the audience will get lost.

Finish your point. If the interviewer tries to interrupt you before you've got to the important thing you want to say, don't be afraid to carry on talking until you've said it. Sometimes it's useful to say "Just a moment" or "If you'd let me finish". Be assertive without being rude.

Don't let yourself be bullied.

Simplicity. Make your points as clearly as possible. Use short sentences and simple words.

Try not to use sub-clauses (a sentence within a sentence), as you might confuse the listener.

Turn hostile questions to good account. There are several ways of doing this: 1) Deal with the question quickly, then move on to what you want to talk about. This is the simplest and safest way of handling tricky questions. A good way of going about it is to agree with part of the question, then show that it's not the whole story. "Yes, of course human welfare is critically important, but that doesn't mean we should neglect animal welfare. At the moment, x per cent of all dairy cows die before they're six years old because of the terrible conditions they're kept in. Now that doesn't do them any good or us any good." Or: "Yes, destroying the potatoes will affect the farmer's livelihood to a small extent. But the issues at stake are enormous. If these plants were allowed to reach maturity ..."

2) Deliberately misinterpreting the question. "You're quite right, there were a lot of undesirable elements at the protest. In fact, there's an urgent need to regulate the security industry properly. Do you know that a lot of security guards have criminal records for violent assault? It's symptomatic of the whole road-building industry: they don't care what they do or who they do it to."

3) Undermining the factual content of the question. In other words, don't let the interviewer push you into a corner. (eg Q: "But, given that biotechnology is necessary to feed the world, what you're really doing is putting wildlife before humanity." A: "In fact you're wrong to suggest that biotechnology is necessary to feed the world. By concentrating food production into the hands of a few multinational corporations ...").

But always, always, bring your answer back round to the point.

Leave your notes behind. If what you want to say isn't in your head, you shouldn't be in the studio.

Project. You're not having a casual chat with the interviewer or the other guest. You have come to make some important points, and you must get them across in such a way that the viewer or listener can't possibly ignore them.

This means that you should put more emphasis into your voice than you'd do in a normal conversation. It might sound strange to you when you first do it (and practice it before you do a real interview), but on air it'll sound fine. In fact, if you don't do it, you'll sound flat and boring. TV and radio are all brightness and colour, and you must sound bright and colourful to make an impact. It's a bit of a balancing act, projecting well without ceasing to stay calm.

Use your body. On TV a good rule is that your head and torso should stay fairly still (which makes you seem solid and trustworthy), but your hands should lend emphasis to what you say (they can help to drive your points home). Eyebrows are pretty useful too.

Humour. If you can do it without making it sound frivolous or irrelevant, a bit of humour can help a lot to win your audience over. Gently satirising your opponent's position is often quite effective. ("Well, let's take a look at this Countryside Alliance. Its main funder is the Duke of Westminster, who, as his name suggests, is a horny-handed son of rural toil. Unfortunately, his rolling green acres in Mayfair and Belgravia keep him in town quite a bit, but at least

that allows him to fight off the undemocratic tendencies of the urban oppressor from the benches of the House of Lords...").

Don't hate your opponent. This is perhaps the hardest task of all, but it is absolutely necessary. Whatever you might think about the person you're up against, you must leave your feelings at the door of the studio. If you allow yourself to hate them, you'll lose your cool, lose focus and lose public sympathy. One way of dealing with your feelings is to regard your opponent as someone who has been misled and needs to be told the truth. Think of your role as being to put them right, rather than to put them down, and you'll find that when you go into the studio you'll be a lot less tense.

And remember - when you go into a studio, you are there to tackle one issue and one issue alone, not to put right the ills of the whole world. Concentrate on one task, and you'll make life a great deal easier for yourself.

Part 6: Following up

A. Keeping up your contacts

It's a good idea to write down the names and numbers of all the journalists you meet, and maybe make a brief note of what they're like and how they treated the subject. If you're going to be involved in a long campaign, keep the sympathetic ones informed about it every so often, so that when the next event comes up, they won't have forgotten what it's all about.

Share your contact lists and experiences with people in other campaigns: it could help them a lot.

B. Complaining

Activists are treated unfairly by the press more often than any other group of people except gypsies, travellers and asylum seekers. The reasons are not hard to divine: we are challenging powerful vested interests, we are prepared to break the law and, above all, we can be discussed collectively without any fear of libel, as we do not belong to incorporated organisations.

So, for example, the Sunday Times could claim that "eco-terrorist" tree-sitters at Solsbury Hill booby-trapped buildings, attacked guards with catapults and crossbows and dug pitfall traps full of metal stakes, safe in the knowledge that, as long as no one was named, no one could sue, even though the whole bullshit story was refuted by the police. Had it, on the other hand, made the same allegations about security guards, Reliance would have sued the pants off it, even if neither the company nor the guards were named, as Reliance was the only security company on site.

Redressing bullshit stories is difficult, time-consuming and often very frustrating, but sometimes it works. If we don't complain, the media will feel free to do the same thing again and again, so it's worth trying, even if it ends in failure. Here are the options: If you're fantastically rich, have been named in person and have lots of free time, sue for libel. It's not an option for most of us, but if you know a lawyer who's prepared to work for free and the case is a clear-cut one, it is worth sending a threatening letter. If it's sufficiently

convincing, it might prompt the paper or programme to issue an apology and settle out of court: and a few thousand quid for your cause never goes amiss. Don't try it without a lawyer: they'll just laugh it off. There is no legal aid for libel cases.

If you or your movement have been slagged off unfairly in the papers, but there's no possibility of legal redress, there are several other options. None of them are ideal, but they're all better than nothing:

Write a letter for publication. Make sure it's short, pertinent and not personally insulting.

Humour and irony are particularly useful weapons.

If you can bear to, talk to the journalist who stitched you up. Be ultra-reasonable and put your case calmly and clearly. Just occasionally, this works, and she or he will relent and write a follow-up piece, putting your side of the story.

This is very long shot but, if you've got good writing skills, see if you can persuade the comment editor to let you write a column putting your case.

Appeal to the Press Complaints Commission. It's a voluntary body set up by the newspapers themselves and is, as a result, pretty useless, even though most of its members are now drawn from outside the press. Its code of practice includes guidance on respect for privacy, the right to reply and journalists' behaviour.

The Press Complaints Commission, 1 Salisbury Square, London EC4 8AE. Fax: 0171 353

8355. Tel: 0171 353 1248

If you've been stitched up by the broadcast media, your prospects are rather better. It's governed by quite a few laws and codes, which are supposed to protect both the public interest and individual rights.

If you've got a small complaint, take it up with the programme concerned: preferably with either the producer or the series editor. If you don't get satisfaction, try one of the following: If it's a BBC TV or radio programme: The BBC Programme Complaints Unit, BBC

Broadcasting House, London W1A 1AA

If it's an ITV programme: The Independent Television Commission, 33 Foley Street, London W1P 7LB. Fax: 0171 306 7800. Tel: 0171 255 3000. Email: 100731.3515@compuserve.com If it's an independent radio programme: The Radio Authority, Holbrook House, 14 Great Queen Street, London WC2B 5DG. Fax: 0171 405 7064. Tel: 0171 430 2724.

If you've got a major complaint, contact the Broadcasting Standards Commission, as well as one of the above. BSC, 7 The Sanctuary, London SW1P 3JS. Fax: 0171 233 0544. Tel: 0171

222 3172.

In all cases, make sure you include the name and date of the programme. Be prepared for a long wait, and keep on their case.

Cumbersome and slow as it is, complaining about unfairness in the broadcast media can be spectacularly worthwhile, as the producers of Channel 4's asinine *Against Nature* series found to their cost. Following thousands of viewer complaints, the Independent Television Commission delivered one of the most damning verdicts in its history, with the result that Channel 4 had to make a humiliating prime-time apology and the series director, Martin Durkin, had to resign from the company he works for. With luck, he will never work in mainstream television again.

Remember: if they stitch you up and you don't complain, they'll do it to you again and again.

Part 7: Conclusion

All campaigning is hard work, and exploiting the media is just as hard as any other aspect.

We've tended to neglect it in the past, and then wonder why no one comes to our actions. Our

movement needs specialist media workers just as much as it needs specialist tree-climbers.

The more there are, the more clearly our message will come across, and the more people will be attracted to our cause. This is how small rumblings turn into earthquakes. The revolution will be televised, but that doesn't mean that it won't also be live.

Taken from the UHC Collective website

Press release guide

Advice and tips on how to make an effective press release or media advisory.

What is a media advisory?

A media advisory is a means of notifying the press of an event or news story that will happen in the future. It is essentially an event reminder that is in a format that makes it easy for journalists to record the event in their calendars or day planners. It is a proactive way for activists to inform news outlets of events and actions that you want publicized in the future.

ALWAYS fax the media advisory, do not e-mail it. There are only two exceptions to this rule: 1) If the media outlet does not have a fax. 2) If you have e-mail addresses of individual journalists, you may e-mail media advisories to those individuals. But, whether you are faxing or e-mailing, you will use the same format below. When faxing the media advisory, you should use standard letter size (8 1/2 x 11) paper, use letterhead and organization logos at the top of the page. The media advisory should fit on one page – remember, this is for a reporters day planner so be brief. if you e-mail the media advisory, send the e-

mail as plain text only.

A sample media advisory

Media advisory

January 21, 2003

"Dismantling the Police State"

Optional short descriptive paragraph about the event here.

WHAT: Teach-in on police brutality and the prison industrial complex.

WHO: John Jones of People Against Bad Stuff (PABF), Mary May of the Down with Cops Organization (DCO), and Tim Timmy of the Anarchist Association of America (AAA) WHEN: 10 a.m. Thursday, February 6

WHERE: Unitarian Church, 555 N 5th St., East Jesus, Ohio BACKGROUND: (optional field keep it to a single paragraph) blah blah blah...

NOTES: (optional field keep it to a single paragraph) blah blah blah...

CONTACT: Jane Doe: (xxx) xxx-xxxx janedoe@janedoe.org **What is a Press Release?**

A press release is a means of informing the press of an event or action that will happen or has happened or is in progress, a newsworthy development (such as the results of an investigation) or any other activity that your group is involved in which may be of interest to journalists. It is the standard means for communicating information about an event or action that you want the press to cover. Press releases should generally be faxed to the news outlet unless you know they accept e-mail press releases, in which case you can send it either way.

After you send the press release, it is very important to call the news outlet and inquire if they received it.

How to write effective press releases There are very specific formats for writing press releases and if you want to improve the odds that your press releases will be read, you must follow them. Furthermore, since the standard

press release format is designed to efficiently transmit information, you have every incentive to use the proper format to get your job done well.

Getting started

To start, you will need to develop press release letterhead. Although styles vary, a typical press release contains the name of the organization, its address and its phone number on the top left and the words "News," "Press Release," or "Media Release" on the top right.

Typically, press release letterhead is on legal size paper (8 1/2" x 14"), although standard letter size (8 1/2" x 11") is also considered appropriate.

You'll also need a #10 (standard business size) carrier envelope that matches your press release letterhead in style, ink color and paper color. It is permissible to use larger envelopes if your release is to be accompanied by other items too large for a #10 envelope, such as photographs, sample copies of books, etc.

At the top of your releases, you should type "For Release: Immediate" or "For Release: Date." If you do not want journalists to use the information until a certain time, type

"Embargoed Until (Date and Time)" after the "For Release." On the right, directly across from the "For Release" information, you should type "Contact:" and then the name or names of the person(s) who will be available to answer questions from the media. The individuals'

phone numbers should be included under their names.

The slug

The first bit of text in a press release is called the slug. This refers to the title, or headline, on the release. The slug should very briefly summarize the topic of the release and, if at all possible, utilize action verbs to sound as interesting and as newsworthy as possible.

The inverted triangle

A good press release follows what is known as the inverted triangle. The inverted triangle means that information should begin with the most important

information. The next paragraph should contain slightly less important information, and so on, until the very last bit of information in the release is the least important. If you have written a release correctly, it should be possible to cut off the bottom half of the release and still provide journalists with sufficient information.

The inverted triangle format is important because journalists receive large numbers of press releases each day. Time constraints may force them to read only the beginning of a release before deciding if they will use the material or throw the release away. It is therefore in your interest to present information in an efficient and straight forward manner so that journalists can access the information quickly.

The lead

The lead is the first sentence or paragraph of a press release. It should contain what is known as the five w's: who, what, where, when and why. These five w's give journalists what they need to know in order to pursue your story. Memorize them and make sure they appear in your lead.

Style

Keep the release short and succinct. A press release should rarely go over one page. Always type a release and use wide margins. It is common for releases to be typed double-spaced to allow journalists to take notes on the release itself. If you don't choose to do so, at least leave space between paragraphs. Paragraphs and sentences should be kept short. Use exact dates

whenever possible (for example, "Monday, June 5" or even "June 5" is more informative than

"next Monday.") When using numbers in text, spell out numbers one through ten. For all other numbers use numerals.

Objectivity

Press releases are designed to transmit facts. Opinions should not be included unless they are clearly identified as such. One way to convey opinion is by including a quote from someone in your group. Make certain that the quote is clearly attributed.

Closing symbols

At the end of a release, you must indicate to journalists that the release is over. There are two commonly-accepted symbols that indicate this. The first is "-30-" and the second "####". Use either at the end of your release, placing whichever you choose in the lower center of the page. In the rare instances that your release goes over one page, type "MORE" at the bottom of any page that is not your last page. Again, this should be centered.

By Shawn Ewald and Adam Weissman

E-mail press releases

Distribute email press releases in plain ASCII text.

Draft your press release as you would any other email message, using an email software program. Never send press releases as attachments to email, or attach other documents to email press releases. If you need to prepare a paper copy of the press release, copy and paste the ASCII text into a word processing document after the release is written in the email program.

Keep the text brief and focused.

An electronic press release should follow the same "pyramid" format as any other press release. Start with the most important information (and remember the five "W's" - who, what, where, when and why). Use short paragraphs and keep it brief.

Write a subject line that's compelling or provocative.

Keep in mind that the subject line is the first thing reporters will see when they download your release. Never email a press release (or any other message) with a blank subject line.

Include your electronic contact information.

Remember to include your email address and Web site URL in addition to your phone and fax number, and address. Put all your contact information at the top of the press release.

Use hyper-links where appropriate.

If there is additional information available on your Web site -- such as a white paper or an event announcement -- include a hyper-link so reporters can click right to it. Online publications will often include these links in their stories, making this an effective way to direct visitors to your Web site.

Send a test message before distributing your press release.

Always send a copy of the press release to yourself or to a colleague before distributing it.

Check the format to make sure there are no broken lines of text, and check for any mistyped Web URLs by testing them to make sure they work.

Avoid disclosing the recipients' email addresses.

Always type the recipients' addresses in the "Bcc" field of your email message header, rather than in the "To" or "Cc" field.

Post your organization's media contact information on the home page of your Web site. Be sure to keep the contact information up-to-date, and include information on how reporters can be added to your mailing list.



Treat email media inquiries the same as phone inquiries.

Always respond just as promptly to email media inquiries as you would to phone calls.

Reporters who work for online publications are much more likely to contact you by email than by phone. If you're responsible for answering media inquiries, check your email frequently throughout the day.

Set up an online archive for your media communications.

Set aside an area of your Web site where reporters can locate past press releases. (If you publish a newsletter in electronic form, maintain an online archive of past issues, as well.) **Post press releases only to appropriate lists, news groups, and publications.**

If you plan to post your press release to any email discussion lists, news groups or online publications, make sure the topic of your release is appropriate content for the list or Web site. If your press release announces a new report on air pollution, it would not be appropriate content for a forum for race car enthusiasts, for example.

Collect email addresses from your media contacts.

If you've been distributing your press releases by fax or postal mail, ask your media contacts if you can switch to email distribution. Major newspapers frequently have separate staffs for their online versions, so you'll need to include those contacts on your list, too. There are also media directories and news services specifically for online publications that may be appropriate to add to your media list.

Excerpted from The Virtual Activist with modifications by Shawn Ewald.

Radio interview guide

A guide on how best to get your message across while being interviewed on the radio.

If you are part of a political or campaign group, talk radio is one of the most effective ways to reach your audience. The opportunities afforded are unparalleled.

Equipment needed

A telephone is all the equipment you need. With a simple phone, you can be

interviewed from anywhere — from home, your office, or even a hotel room. My favorite "studio" is in my office facing my computer. Additionally, I use a telephone headset, which I highly recommend.

One benefit of a headset is free hands. With free hands you have the freedom to access reference materials, your computer, and jot down notes while you are talking. Before doing a show, I bring up a "radio" file on my computer. In this file I have all sorts of useful

information for the interview (more on this later). I also use the computer to type notes to myself. For instance, during the breaks many ideas come to mind for the next segment. I quickly write down these ideas. Some hosts have a knack for throwing their guests off target, so you want to do everything you can to stay focused. The one other thing I always have on hand is a big glass of water.

Getting on talk shows

Talk radio hosts are always looking for interesting, informative, and provocative guests —

not necessarily in that order. Actually, depending upon the size of the station, it's often the

"producer" who finds and schedules guests. However, you don't need to know producers to get on a talk show.

Unless your issues have national impact, you should limit your exposure to the community in which your group operates. One advantage to doing local radio shows is that you can be interviewed in the radio station's sound studio. Using a studio mike results in better audio quality than when you use a telephone. Another advantage is face to face visual cues often help during an interview.

If your group's interest is national in scope, you might want to start with talk shows in your city, then appear on shows in other communities. Nationally syndicated shows will save you time by hitting many cities at once.

How to start

If your group has a publication, add the names of known talk show hosts to your mailing list.

Also, send them newspaper clippings about your group, press releases, and brochures. If you or someone in your organisation writes a book related to the purpose of your group, send book reviews or a sample copy to the radio station. (Your publisher may assist you in this.) Be sure to include contact information so producers will know whom to contact.

Simply sending timely material will most likely get you on the air. If your organisation is national in scope, there's another cost-effective way to get your spokesperson on shows all over the country. In the US, for example, Bradley Communications, of Lansdowne, Pennsylvania, publishes Radio-TV Interview Report — The Magazine to Read for Guests &

Show Ideas. Published three times a month, this excellent magazine is sent to 4,000 hosts and producers. Each issue contains 64 pages of display ads from experts and opinion makers. You can look for similar publications in your country.

When planning our next media strategy, I always consider advertising in Radio-TV Interview Report. Because of its frequency and reach, activists can organise a radio blitz lasting a few weeks, or even months. I continue to get calls months after my ads run. The staff at Radio-TV

Interview Report will write your ad for you. All you have to do is supply the information you want talk show hosts to have about you and your group. This information might include your group's newsletter or magazine, a book, a photo (for TV), or a press release. You'll receive a fax of your ad copy for your approval before it runs. You can run your ad once, three times a month, or once a month for as long as you like; it's up to you. Radio-TV Interview Report has never failed to get me on more shows than I could handle, easily justifying the cost of the ads.

You might also land some TV talk shows. (To contact Radio-TV Interview Report, write to PO Box 1206, Lansdowne, PA 19050-8206, or call Jack Lewis at 610-259-8206, ext. 408.) **When a producer calls**

When a producer calls, make sure you learn the name of the host, the radio station, and its location. You should also ask about the host's position on the issues you'll be discussing.

Although it doesn't matter what your host's positions are, it's good to know in

advance.

For some reason, Christian stations often try to hide that fact from me; then attempt to ambush me on the air (this is obviously less of an issue in the UK - libcom). I still do those stations, but I like to know in advance if they have a Christian format. Recently, I've begun to look for a station's call letters in the National Religious Broadcasters' Directory of Religious Media.

Ask how long you'll be on; don't assume it'll be an hour, it might be less. Many of my appearances have been extended for an extra hour or so. It all depends on audience response

— and whether another guest is scheduled to follow you. You want to be sure you have enough material on hand for a longer show. Most programs are live, and because of callers, are the most interesting. Occasionally, the host will tape your interview for a later airing.

Write down the producer's name and phone number. If you have to cancel, call as far in advance as you can. When setting the date and time, be sure you understand what time zone the show is in. Don't forget to write down all this information in your appointment book.

What to expect on the air

Here are some of the notes I have in my computer's "radio" file. I have a collection of one-liners I've successfully used as retorts, facts and legal cases regarding my issue, talking points, and even a few interesting quotations.

Before each interview I type in the station's call letters, city, and the host's and producer's names. Then I add personal notes, such as Relax, enjoy yourself, use and keep a sense of humor, remember you don't have to answer every question, answer questions with questions when appropriate, promote issue X. While all this may sound trite, sometimes in the heat of a talk show these things are easily forgotten. I also prepare a brief opening statement, and a note to myself about what issues to focus on during the program.

A friendly host will support and guide you during the show. Even the most hostile host is just doing it for effect, and, if you know your material, you'll do fine. Most callers are polite —

but often ill-informed. An experienced host will keep the unruly ones in line, sometimes by cutting them off.

Don't "read" any statements, including your opening remarks. Remember not to say anything that you would not want to go out over the air. You may think you're off the air when you're not. Keep your remarks short, develop good sound bites, and have plenty of facts on hand.

Never attack the host or callers. Above all, be yourself. Keep cool and maintain a sense of humor.

It's extremely helpful to provide contact information — an 800 number, or a simple address

— so listeners can reach you. It's also a good idea to make a free offer, such as a copy of your newsletter. Remember, you're on the air to promote the mission of your group, advance a cause, or deal with specific issues. Stay on target

Excerpted from "Say it on the radio", Institute for First Amendment Studies with modifications by Shawn Ewald